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Differential Reactions to Hurt

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ABSTRACT - Introjective hurt refers to the tendency to internalize and magnify hurtful experience by self-criticism and self-punishment, whereas retaliatory hurt is defined as lashing out angrily at the source of hurt. The utility of this two-factor model of hurt was explored in a hypothetical experiment. Participants ($N = 166$) were asked to imagine being deeply hurt by someone close either intentionally or not in a public or private setting. Two $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (gender of respondent $\times$ intentionality $\times$ setting) ANOVAs indicated that intentional as compared to unintentional acts in private as compared to public settings leads to increased introjective hurt. By contrast, retaliatory hurt was greater only in the intentional vs. unintentional condition.

Keywords:

Introjective hurt;
Retaliatory hurt; Self-criticism; Aggressive response;
Interpersonal conflict

Introduction

Hurt, which has been conceptualized as feeling emotionally injured or harmed by another person, arises as a result of a perceived interpersonal transgression, rejection, threat, or frustration and is associated with feelings of suffering, anguish, anger, and guilt (Fine & Olson, 1997; Shaver et al., 1987; Vangelisti, 1994). Current conceptualizations of hurt have focused on self-punitive aspects of the hurt response (e.g., Snapp & Leary, 2002). However, a single situation may give rise to multiple, subjective, emotional experiences (Whitesell & Harter, 1996).

The distinction in clinical depression proposed by Blatt (1974) is potentially relevant in this regard. Specifically, Blatt proposed that depression involves: (a) introjective depression, which is characterized by feelings of self-doubt, self-criticism, and guilt including vigilance for disapproval

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and rejection and thus a heightened tendency to assume blame and responsibility and to be harshly self-critical and self-punitive, and (b) anaclitic depression, which is characterized by dependency on others for support and gratification, but also difficulty in managing anger and aggression for fear of losing, or destroying, the object of one's affectionate-need and the satisfaction he or she provides (Blatt, 1974). Blatt's two types of depression describe two patterns of responding to hurt feelings that, intuitively, appear to exhaust the common maladaptive responses to being hurt. Specifically, to some extent people tend to internalize their hurt by engaging in self-blame, denoting the introjective style of hurt response. Also, people have a tendency to lash out angrily and aggressively toward those whom they perceive as having hurt their feelings, which is representative of an anaclitic or retaliatory pattern of hurt reactivity. One purpose of the present study is to explore this distinction in relation to hurt feelings.

Furthermore, Blatt proposed that the introjective and anaclitic typologies may be viewed as representations of normal personality development and are not limited to the realm of psychopathology. Specifically, Blatt and his colleagues suggested that the two major objectives of personality development are the acquisition of stable, enduring, and mutually satisfying mature relationships and establishing a consistent realistic, and positive self-identity (Cramer et al., 1988).

Previous research has identified factors underlying hurtful experiences. One factor yielding consistent results is intentionality. For example, Vangelisti and Young (2000) found that individuals who perceived a comment as intentionally hurtful are more likely to distance themselves from their offending relationship partners than those who viewed a statement as unintentionally hurtful. Such findings support the idea that all emotions are associated with an approach - avoidant state of action readiness, or a tendency to engage with or disengage from those in one's environment, based upon the feelings encountered (Frijda, 1986).

A less consistent correlate of hurt is gender. Some studies report that women are more likely than men to experience and report hurt feelings across a variety of provocations (Fine & Olson, 1997). Thus, women may be more willing than men to discuss hurt feelings and to actively seek solutions to problems that arise in relationships in order to restore or maintain a given relationship. Men, on the other hand, are assumed to desire strength and autonomy, and therefore, they may see admitting to hurt as equivalent to being perceived as weak, wanting, inadequate, and incomplete (L'Abate, 1999). In fact, many researchers and theorists have suggested that boys and girls deal differently with interpersonal problems and that girls tend to report more varied emotional responses, such as anger and sadness, to given relational conflicts than do boys (Whitesell & Harter, 1996).

By contrast, Leary et al. (1998) found no gender differences in the general types of events that hurt men's and women's feelings, nor in their subjective experience of hurt. The only difference that was observed was a tendency for men to hide their hurt feelings in the presence of other people especially men. Thus, men may be just as vulnerable as women to being hurt by those they care about; however, both men and women prefer to reveal their hurt to women, who are thought to be more supportive and understanding of such displays of emotion and men especially prefer to hide their hurt.

The research on gender differences in hurt then may suggest that, although both men and women react strongly and negatively to having their feelings hurt, women are more likely than men to admit to feeling hurt especially in specific contexts such as the presence of others. Consequently, an additional purpose of this research was to examine differential reactions to hurt by male and female respondents in social vs. dyadic contexts.

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and sixty-six college students (112 women and 54 men) participated in exchange for nominal course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 years ($M = 20.28$) and the majority were white (89%) and unmarried (93.1%). Participants were presented with a description of a hypothetical situation in which a close relationship partner hurt their feelings under one of four conditions. Specifically, participants were asked either to imagine that a relationship partner hurt them intentionally or unintentionally in a private (only the two persons present) or public (other people are also present and observe the incident) setting. Participants were then asked to indicate their likely reactions on a 21-item inventory specifically designed to assess differences between introjection and retaliatory reactions to hurt.

Measures

The introjective and retaliatory response pattern measures used in these analyses were developed in an earlier study (Negel, 2002). Participants were asked to rate 21 probable responses to offenses in percentage format on an 11-point Likert-type scale. Of these items, six were designed to assess an introjective response pattern. These items included the following: “Degree of hurt I feel,” “Wondered what I did wrong,” “Said and/or did nothing,” “Blamed self for incident,” “Gave in to him/her,” and “Feel depressed/sad over it.” Previous analyses of the introjective measure indicate that it is reliable with a coefficient alpha of .74 and a mean inter-item correlation of .37. Seven of the 21 items depict the retaliatory response pattern, including “Have ‘gotten back at’ him/her,” “Retaliated against him/her,” “Confronted him/her about the problem,” “Blamed him/her for what happened,” “Felt angry toward him/her,” “Held grudge toward him/her,” and “Harmed relationship.” The retaliatory response pattern measure is internally consistent with a coefficient alpha of .76 and a mean inter-item correlation of .35. The remaining items are fillers included to help disguise the purpose of the study.

Results

Two separate 2 (setting; public vs. private) $\times$ 2 (intentionality) $\times$ 2 (gender) Analyses of Variance tested the effects of these conditions on both the introjective and the retaliatory response patterns to hurt feelings. Table 1 presents means for all conditions. Analyses indicate that intentionally inflicted hurt accounts for both greater retaliatory, $F(1, 164) = 34.56, p < .01$, and greater introjective, $F(1, 164) = 14.24, p < .01$, response patterns. Also, private settings account for greater introjective reactions than public settings, $F(1, 164) = 5.13, p < .05$. Differences in these reactions related to gender were not significant as was the case also for all of the interaction terms.

Table 1: Mean hurt responses

	Public				Private			
	Intentional		Unintentional		Intentional		Unintentional	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Introjective	28.08	29.84	23.48	25.67	31.83	32.10	25.19	29.03
Retaliatory	55.84	55.53	47.63	50.05	56.10	52.69	49.14	48.10

Discussion

The hypothetical hurt incident study revealed that ascribing intentionality to a hurtful act (i.e., believing that the perpetrator purposely set out to hurt the victim's feelings) results in imagined immediate and aggressive retaliation and in the internalizing and self-punitive responses of the introjective hurt pattern. Furthermore, results indicated that the introjective pattern of responses to interpersonal hurt is more likely to occur in private settings as compared to public settings. These results suggest that the experience of both introjective and retaliatory hurt is easily triggered by perceptions of the perpetrator's motives; specifically, whether or not the victimization is seen as intentional. Ironically, being hurt in private apparently gives rise specifically to greater introjective, but not retaliatory hurt. Perhaps individuals who are hurt in private settings are more likely to internalize the hurt and engage in self-blame because there is no other person present with him or her beyond the perpetrator of the hurt and thus, the blame is more easily placed on himself or herself.

Individuals' reactions to perceived intentionality play a critical role in interpersonal relationships as they shape the meaning, either positive or negative, associated with another person's behavior, especially regarding their transgressions. According to Vangelisti and Young (2000), people rely on a number of cues to detect intentionality in others' behaviors: (a) perceived volition (whether the individual chose to engage in the behavior), (b) forethought (whether the person planned the behavior), (c) foreseeability, or knowledge, of the behavior's consequences (whether the individual was aware of the outcomes that would be associated with his/her action), and (d) valence (whether the person felt the outcomes of the behavior were desirable or undesirable). This elicitation of greater hurt may be due to the fact that an intentionally hurtful behavior or comment is associated with free choice, planning, awareness, and desire on the part of the perpetrator of the hurtful incident.

Thus, these data support a traditional view that hurt represents emotional vulnerability, which can be thought of as being potentially maladaptive and indicative of resigning oneself to a position of powerlessness as fears that being assertive may lead to further hurtful encounters. However, these data also suggest that hurt gives rise to retaliatory impulses and some factors of the hurtful

experience (i.e., intentionality) give rise to both response patterns, whereas others (public vs. private setting) yield one pattern, but not the other.

The results from the present study are undoubtedly limited due to the exclusive use of college students and self-report methodology. Furthermore, it is not clear whether reactions to hypothetical instances of hurt would generalize to more naturally occurring situations. On the other hand, these results are consistent with studies using more realistic methods and involving more diverse samples of participants.

Fine and Olson (1997) describe anger and hurt as the primary affective correlates of the two major classes of psychological disorders, those of externalizing and internalizing disorders. These results suggest the relevance of both to hurtful experiences. Other researchers have found that these emotional responses to interpersonal transgressions are inversely related to individual well-being and relational adjustment especially in their exaggerated or extreme forms (Blatt, 1974; Blatt et al., 1976; Nezlek et al., 1997). Issues for future research include the point at which these two reactions become clinically relevant. Also, to what extent are these patterns mutually exclusive in the sense that in a given instance a person will tend to manifest one but not the other as compared to simultaneous or sequential reactions? Similarly, are some people prone to introjective reactions whereas others are consistently retaliatory?

It may be that those who experience introjective hurt are at even greater risk of developing self-esteem problems and even depression as they internalize the hurtful experience and compound its self-effacing negativity. Those who experience hurt in a retaliatory manner may fare better in this regard as they tend to react externally to the hurtful episode; by venting their anger and pain overtly, they experience a degree of emotional catharsis that allows for a partial, if not complete, resolution to the hurtful experience. In either case, the hurt experience has a significant impact on both the individual and his or her relationship with the offending other. It is also possible that, similar to the conclusions of Blatt and colleagues (1976), these two types of hurt are not mutually exclusive and may occur either simultaneously or sequentially. These and other speculative accounts of the importance and nature of hurt feelings require future empirical studies.

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